

## **“Continually Becoming”**

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Our culture places a high value on achievement, on attaining some goal that has been set. We set goals and then we strive to attain them. We set goals, whether consciously or unconsciously, to attain wealth, knowledge, beauty, power, happiness, success, security, comfort, contentment or any number of other things we value. Once we have attained a particular goal we strive to insure that what we have attained remains. And often, once we have attained a particular goal, we set another.

This process of setting goals, striving, attaining the goal and then setting new goals is something that you will find written about in any number of articles and books that are intended to motivate us to achieve success, however we might envision that. And there are some definite benefits that accompany engaging in this process. I know I have spent a significant portion of my life engaging in this process. Setting goals, striving, attaining a goal and setting a new goal has been essential to my becoming who I am today.

I will offer here one example of how this process has played a significant role in my life. As I do so, I would invite you to think about how this process has played a role in your own life. From the time I was very young, both of my parents stressed the importance of education. Neither of them graduated from high school and they recognized how that fact created limitations in their lives. So with their encouragement, support and sometimes insistence, and in spite of the fact that school has never been one of my favorite activities, I attained a high school diploma, a Bachelor of Social Work degree, a Master of Social Work degree and a Master of Divinity degree. Now before I go any further, I want to state emphatically that despite what the degree titles assert, I am not a master of social work nor a master of divinity. I am, and will continue to be, a student of both fields in my ongoing process of learning and growth. But each of these educational achievements are important. And each one is the result of engaging in the goal setting, striving and achieving process.

None of the achievements I just mentioned, however, would have been possible without those who assisted, supported and even challenged me. As we heard in our reading, “we are neither purely individual nor fully a creature of our community, but an act of becoming.” I credit my parents with pointing me on the path to learning by telling me how important education is. And I am grateful to them for how they spoke about the importance of education. The way they shared their perspective about education was congruent with the concept of becoming. They talked to me often about the value of getting an education. But they never once told me to get educated. Those two statements sound very similar, similar enough that it would be easy to think they both say the same thing. In actuality, they are quite different. The phrase, “get educated” alludes to a specific point of achievement or even an end point. You set a goal of getting educated, you strive for that goal and you eventually accomplish it. Once you accomplish it you are done. From my experience that isn’t how life, or education works. The phrase, “get an education,” on the other hand, is an open-ended proposition. It didn’t and doesn’t involve a specific goal which will someday be accomplished. Getting an education, at least for me, is an ongoing process. In my mind the phrase “get an education” is an invitation to allow life to continually teach me. As a result, the journey of life is a process of continual becoming—becoming educated, becoming informed, becoming aware. I view getting an education as a fundamental and essential part of my journey of life.

So while neither of my parents graduated from high school, the way they conveyed their thoughts about the importance of getting an education was very wise. The phrase, get an education, helped me to develop what is now being referred to as a “growth mindset.” The concept of “growth mindset” was developed by Dr. Carol S. Dweck, who is a Professor of Psychology at Stanford University. In her book *The New Psychology of Success*, Dr. Dweck discusses two types of mindsets that a person can have. These two mindsets exist on a continuum. At one end is the growth mindset and at the other is the fixed mindset. These two phrases refer to the implicit views and beliefs a person has about where one’s ability originates from. The

perspective that one's ability is connected to an attribute that is innate and unchangeable is associated with the fixed mindset end of the continuum. The perspective that one's ability is connected to what one does, such as getting training, seeking out information and/or education, and diligently investing time and effort to accomplish some task or goal is associated with the growth mindset end of the continuum. Having a growth mindset can play an important role in achieving success through the goal setting/goal achievement process. And it is also a fundamental element in the process of continually becoming, whether through goal setting or not. For me, having been encouraged to develop a capacity for the growth mindset, and engaging in the goal setting, striving and achieving process, has allowed me to become who I am today, a UU minister serving the members and friends of the Bozeman Fellowship. And I feel very good about that. I imagine, like me, you can think of many achievements in your life that are the result both of the goal setting/goal achievement process and of the growth mindset.

So there are definitely benefits to engaging in the goal setting/goal achievement process. But there can also be pitfalls and drawbacks. If goal setting and goal achievement go too far, the process can take over our lives in ways that are not beneficial. We can find ourselves continually striving to arrive, only to discover that the more we strive and the more we achieve, the more we feel compelled to drive ourselves harder in an effort to achieve more. We can begin to feel like we are a hamster in a cage and the only thing there is to do is run endlessly on a wheel that takes us nowhere.

I recall a man I knew years ago who told me about how he had become so involved in the process of striving to arrive that it nearly destroyed him. His desire to achieve took physical form. His three car garage and a storage building were filled with all types of outdoor equipment including motor boats, personal water craft, all-terrain vehicles and an RV to name just a few of the items he came to own. He spent so much time maintaining and caring for all of his possessions that it reached the point where he had very little time to use any of them for their intended purpose. And even when he was able to use them, he found himself thinking about their upkeep. Having possessions, which had been a significant goal in his life, didn't provide him with what he thought it would, or with what he wanted. He didn't feel accomplished, which he thought having possessions would provide him. And his possessions didn't give him enjoyment. He came to realize that he didn't own his possessions. Instead, his possessions owned him. When he finally recognized this, and he didn't have a goal to strive for, he felt lost, he became despondent, and he experienced an existential crisis. The process of goal setting and striving had come to rule his life. It had narrowed the focus of his life so much that he had neglected to develop areas of his life that would have been very beneficial to him and to those he was closest to.

I share this story to make a point. When we focus our attention too intensely on our goals, on our hoped-for destination whatever that may be, our ability to attend to the journey we are on diminishes significantly. By focusing too intensely, we can find ourselves believing and living as if the only thing that matters in life is the destination, the goal. Even though we set the goal originally, the goal can take control of our lives and control of us. If this happens, we may not be able to recognize that, as the saying goes, life is a journey, not a destination.

Life is first and foremost about becoming. Striving and arriving are part of the larger and much more important process of becoming. When we get confused about which process is which, and which process is more important and elemental than the other, we soon find ourselves facing problems. The process of goal setting, striving, goal achievement and goal setting again is not the same as the process of becoming, it is only a part of becoming.

So far my focus has been on becoming as it relates to us as individuals. But continual becoming isn't something that is limited to an individual, it occurs for organizations, such as our Fellowship, as well. Over the course of this past year we have experienced significant changes in how we function as a Fellowship. That we are holding our service online this morning is one very clear example of the significant change that has taken place. Over the past year we have had to become more creative and more nimble in order to maintain our connections with one another. And we have also had to let go of some things that either took too much time and energy to maintain or simply weren't possible given the circumstances.

In spite of the challenges we have faced, we have continued to journey together. We have sometimes used the goal setting/goal achievement process along the way. Over the past year, however, I have observed a change in what happens during the online meetings I participate in. The amount of time and attention that is spent focused on and sharing about what is going on in our lives and in our community is more than when we were meeting in person. I interpret this to be an indication that in those meetings we are focusing more on the journey, on the process of becoming, than we did in past meetings. While we continue to set goals and seek to attain those goals, I believe we are attending more than we did in the past to the process of continually becoming which is taking place in this Fellowship.

This makes me wonder if the pandemic may be providing us an opportunity—an opportunity similar to what I described earlier with the man who had accumulated so many possessions. Just as he discovered that his possessions weren't giving him what he hoped for, might we discover areas where our way of functioning or being isn't meeting our expectations or our needs? Might we examine anew what it is that really matters to us as a community? I think it is quite possible we will. And I also think it is likely that as we begin to set the goal and plan for returning to in-person gatherings again that we will pay close attention not just to the goal but also to the journey that is unfolding. The journey, my friends, which supports and allows our continual becoming as a Fellowship, is what matters most. May we immerse ourselves in the journey of becoming. And may we be willing to ask whether our goals and accomplishments of the past may be controlling or limiting our ability to become the Fellowship we have the potential to be.

So may it be.